

B I B L E S T U D Y

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Neighbors in Need

Justice and Witness Ministries
United Church of Christ at 50

Support Neighbors in Need



Introduction

Jubilee Bible Study

In the ninth month of the 49th year of their marriage, my father passed away peacefully in his sleep. It was not totally unexpected. Since I was en route to graduate school when my father died, when I arrived at my destination the dean informed me of his death. I turned around and made my way back home.



The morning after I arrived home, I awoke early, still suffering the effects of traveling the six time zones back to Hawaii. I padded softly to my living room. There I found my Buddhist mother kneeling in front of the shrine, tears flowing gently down her cheeks. Besides the normal grief she felt, there was in her that sense of a lack of fulfillment, having anticipated that important 50th anniversary.

Fifty years. Jubilee. It is so important, and in so many ways and in just about all cultures I know. But for those of us within the Judeo-Christian faith, it is especially so, and for a variety of reasons. One reason for its importance is that the Jubilee year is based on Jewish numerology, in which the number seven signifies completion or fulfillment. Seven times seven intensifies that concept. Thus, the number fifty symbolizes the beginning of a new cycle, a sort of fresh start. A second reason is that the jubilee is based on creation and Sabbath. Chapter 1 of this Bible Study takes a closer look at all of this.

For those of us in the United Church of Christ, this year affords us an opportunity to reflect deeply on jubilee and its present significance for us in our contemporary setting. How seriously do we take this aspect of our biblical faith? If we consider this concept important, how will we apply it to our individual and corporate lives? What will it take to do justice to this observance as we move into the 50th year of existence?

As we will see throughout this Bible Study, the concept of jubilee lifts up justice as a centerpiece of its observance. Many will find some of the biblical material on jubilee disturbing, especially the Leviticus 25 passage in Chapter 5. Hopefully, these study materials will help both to bring clarity to the issue and to assist us in dealing with our discomfort. In spite of all of the contextually-formed understandings in the passage, jubilee remains an important guide for us.

As we anticipate and live into our jubilee year as a denomination, the call to justice-making in the jubilee will help us reaffirm our identity and formation. This Bible Study is intended to help us understand jubilee in its original setting. Hopefully, such an understanding will also better enable us to live out our justice commitments in our day.

May the God who ordained jubilee into our lives empower us to live it out in this challenging and need-full time.

Rev. Wallace Ryan Kuroiwa *is Minister and Cleveland based Co-Team Leader, Justice and Witness Ministries.*

What is Jubilee?

Jubilee is rooted in the nature of God the Creator. This profoundly simple affirmation is key to understanding jubilee as more than some imaginative flight of fancy of some religious idealist. Scriptures challenge our thinking about jubilee: if you want to take God seriously, jubilee must be taken seriously. We who would follow God faithfully must observe this radical concept.

Jubilee extends the concept of shabat to its logical conclusion. Shabat or Sabbath is translated accurately as “to rest” or “to stop working.” The Creator rested on the seventh day, not because of weariness, but simply because God understood rest to be essentially a part of the cycle of life.¹ That same God admonishes us – for our own good – to imitate the divine example.² When we observe Sabbath, we are in harmony with the cycle of life.

The Deuteronomy Code further amplifies the cycle of life to include another observance. The Hebrew people are taught that they are to observe every seventh year as a Sabbath as well.³ This law provided for the three main components of jubilee observance: forgiving debt, resting the land, and freeing of slaves.

This cycle of seven culminates in the concept of the jubilee year.⁴ Seven years times seven—forty nine years was seen in the Torah as a full and complete cycle. Therefore, the fiftieth year begins a new cycle, a veritable new year.

Jubilee is about cleansing and starting over in this new year. Old debt (something the biblical writers consistently rail against), bondages and oppression, and overuse and pollution of the land (understood more broadly than soil to include rivers and oceans and other aspects of the creation) are washed away. It is a time of liberation. The word “jubilee” is probably taken from the Hebrew yobel. Yobel in Arabic means ram, because the year’s beginning was signaled by the blowing of a ram’s horn. In the jubilee year, freedom (liberty) is to be proclaimed throughout the land.⁵

This theme of liberation is threefold. First, it is liberation for those whose land has been taken from them. They are allowed to reclaim their land. Second, slaves are liberated in this fiftieth year. And finally, those who toil on the land are liberated from working the land.⁶

Ched Myers rightly contends that what he calls “Jubilee Economics” is a necessary concept in a context of dramatic inequalities. In a world in which capitalism reigns supreme, we find obscene greed and wealth on the part of a powerful few, while the vast majority of the people of the world live in grinding and unforgiving poverty and want. Furthermore, such inequality causes greater and greater separation between the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor. Myers insists that it



is sinful for Christians to accept this situation. The good news of the jubilee is that we have an opportunity to redistribute the goods and services necessary for the essentials of life, if we take it seriously.

Glimmers of hope can be affirmed in a few movements and progress made. Thankfully, the Church has been involved in significant ways in those places. The Jubilee Movement for debt cancellation and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals are but two notable examples.

But so much more remains to be done. Global warming threatens the land. Access to clean, safe drinking water is a growing. Our economy is driven by debt accumulation. Slavery continues to plague humankind.

Now, more than ever, we who call ourselves Christians need to take jubilee seriously and work toward its fulfillment.

Rev. Wallace Ryan Kuroiwa is Minister and Cleveland based Co-Team Leader, Justice and Witness Ministries.

The Cancellation of Debt

Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed.

Deuteronomy 15:1-2



More than at any time in our history, we are aware of our fragile global community. Our lives, cultures, and environment are part of an intricate set of relationships, principles, and values, forming a web of cause and effect, of actions and consequences, and even of wonderment.

Economics is part of the vibrant infrastructure of this global community—

this oikoumene. Today, the economic forces of the global community transcend national boundaries and the constitutional governments of nation states. Two sets of global financial forces are giving shape to a new reality, locally, nationally, and internationally. In the first, an investor economy seeks greater profit margins, capital, and hegemonic financial power with no social accountability. In the second, a worker economy seeks livable wages, acceptable working conditions, the right to organize, and basic social benefits like health care and adequate housing.

At the same time, economic relationships among countries are being developed and designed not by their national treasuries, but by external financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The modus operandi of these financial institutions that exact loans from the world's poorest nations is similar to that of pay day loan stores in poor communities across the United States. People in desperate situations make desperate decisions, and financial entities take advantage of their vulnerability and charge high interest rates. When a person or a nation cannot make payments on time, the interest on the debt is often a thousand times more than the initial loan amount.⁷ In time, interest on the debt continues to be charged even though the principal on a loan has been paid. For example, the debt of Haiti, the world's poorest country, has more than tripled in the past decade. Haiti now spends as much on debt payments as it does on healthcare.

Individuals may end up losing their car or their home. A country may end up losing control of its natural resources or the ability to provide healthcare, education, potable water, etc. to its citizens. The futility of such situations compels Christians to advocate for immediate debt cancellation and for the creation of sustainable economies that are responsive to the voice and common good of the majority of the people. As a community of faith and hope, our spiritual and theological resources can guide us in taking bold actions.

In Deuteronomy,⁸ the seventh year is offered as the Acceptable Year of the Lord. It is a cyclical anchor to a calendar of cultural and theological activity for the Israelites. In the seventh year, all are compelled to forgive any debts owed to them by their neighbors. In this way, all God's people are liberated to pursue new ways of relating to one another that are not dictated by financial constraints.

In the chronology of biblical history, Deuteronomy was written as the Israelites were waiting on the plains of Moab ready to enter the Promised Land into Canaan, after having been enslaved in Egypt and after having wandered in the wilderness. Moses convened and addressed the community, reminding those present of their history, delineating their laws, and instructing them about being loyal to God. Ultimately, Moses required them to uphold law and theological instruction as a covenant.⁹ All of this is subsequently referred to in the 'scroll of Torah,' discovered in the Temple,¹⁰ which influences religious and social reforms.

Deuteronomy 15 offers the laws of sabbatical freedom and declares every seventh year an occasion for debt forgiveness. There were precedents for such amnesties in the ancient Near East.¹¹ Mesopotamian kings proclaimed acts of ‘justice’ or ‘equity’ (Akkadian *Misarum*) involving the cancellation of debt and other obligations, especially at the beginning of their reigns.¹² An Akkadian custom, called *duraru*, also granted one-time cancellation of debts, the return of land confiscated by the crown, and the freeing of indentured slaves. *Duraru* is referred to in the Hebrew as ‘*deror*,’ ‘jubilee’ or ‘release.’¹³ It was a way of uniting the people of Israel, by promoting an open and generous attitude.

This ancient context speaks to our time. Our common commitment to justice and compassion is for all of the *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited earth where our neighbors reside. We have no choice but to generously share resources, to outline just economic principles, and to secure sustainable economic policies for all of our brothers and sisters around the globe.

PRAYER:

We remember, O God, your instruction to our ancestors in faith, to cancel the debts of our neighbors and restore them to dignity. Let us work to forgive the debt of others and remove all obstacles to their living in peace.

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Release of Captives

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. *Luke 4:18-19*

The beautiful hula came to an end, and the men prepared for the traditional “awa” ceremony. The meal would be next, along with speeches and words of gratitude to those of us who had come as supporters and advocates. Then we would close with prayers to Lono and to the other gods of their tradition, and with the sacred nose-to-nose ritual of sharing of the sacred breath of



life. As I stood in that circle of life, watching men I had come to call “friend” move confidently from one ritual to the next, speaking a language that many of them had not known three years ago, I reflected on God’s dream of jubilee. It had been over three years since that

freezing February morning (at 5:00 a.m.!) when six of us stood in the parking lot of Diamondback Correctional Facility in Watonga, Oklahoma. That morning we chanted the words that native Hawaiian peoples have chanted every Makahiki season for generations—“E ala E”—coaxing the sun into new life. We chanted what the Native Hawaiians imprisoned inside could not, because they had been denied them the right to practice their ancient religion.

Much has changed in three years. A simple act of chanting in solidarity with the Native Hawaiian men grew into stubborn advocacy on their behalf. Eventually, prison officials softened their stance and allowed the men to study and practice their religion two hours a week and to celebrate holy days six times each year. Spiritual leaders came from Hawaii to give them guidance. I was one of a handful of supporters who accompanied the men as they reconnected with their Native Hawaiian roots, participating in their weekly meetings and holy day celebrations.

Over time, the men's confidence grew. They put into practice what their spiritual leaders had taught them, uttering age-old prayers in their traditional tongue, dancing



the ancient steps of the hula, making offerings to their traditional gods, and celebrating the “awa” ceremony like the generations before them. Most of the men now use their Hawaiian names more often than their English ones. There

is a sense of pride in their eyes and in their demeanor. Even though they are still imprisoned, I could sense a new freedom in their spirits, the kind of freedom that comes from knowing who and whose you are.

I was mindful of Jesus' words in the Gospel of Luke. To inaugurate his ministry, Jesus used ancient prophetic images⁴ to describe the kingdom to which he and those who would become his followers are called. Using images intended to remind an oppressed people how different the kingdom of God is from the kingdom of Caesar, Jesus identified five recipients of God's Good News: the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed, and the landless who are enslaved to those to whom they owe money. Jesus proclaimed that those who have been most victimized by Roman institutions were already the recipients of liberation—the liberation that comes to all of us when we realize that our dignity and self-worth derives not from any ruler or any system, but from the One who created and sustains us. Even though they were still living under Caesar's reign, Jesus wanted—and still wants—his brothers and sisters of every tongue and hue, every creed and status to know the freedom that comes from knowing who and whose we are.

Jesus lived—and calls us to live—as if this year, and every year, is the year of God's Jubilee!

PRAYER:

We remember that as Jesus began his work among us, he preached liberty, deliverance, and redemption. He claimed fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy with his obedience to your call, O God. We rejoice in Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-Us, who calls us to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, release of the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor.

Rev. Leslie K. Penrose recently completed 14 years as the founding pastor of Community of Hope UCC in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and is now the Executive Director of JustHope, a resource organization for developing global partnerships. In the national setting of the UCC, she serves on the Boards of Directors of Justice and Witness Ministries and Executive Council. She is also the Director of Ministerial Formation for UCC students at Phillips Theological Seminary.



Chapter 4

The Land Shall Lie Fallow

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. *Exodus 23:10-11*

Chrysalis (A Day of Life)

I breathe in the spaces I enter
As the sun rises from the dark,
And lift my eyes from noonday's slumber
When light flickers my blinds, like
 flashing sparks.
Then daylight yawns as I stretch,
Its noisy alarm for me to begin,
And my body begins to struggle
Tearing old shell from limb.
One foot is out
Steps to car, one in front of its other,
And surely this day meant to live
Remains surrounded by fear's tight cover.
I press on

My shades through blind light
Breaking speed through wind
By car, to work's drumming blight.
Once I arrive
Wriggled into another day
I settle nervousness and rest
My weary self, ready for come what may.
Until I can fly
With wings unfettered and new
My heart beats to await fresh breath
When Ancient of Days caresses life from
 what's blue.

– Dearthrice DeWitt

The agricultural practice of fallowness—the dormancy of the land—is familiar to many people because we feel the same cycle in the rhythm of our lives. “Chrysalis” expresses a time when I was struggling to understand the dormancy in my own landscape. I thought I had a lot going for me. I had a job, a car, a roof over my head, and clothes on my back. Many relationships sustained me. I even had a “fruitful” understanding with God—I expected God to be at my beck and call. Life was good.

Sometimes, however, God does the fallowing. God laid fallow my idolatry with silent withdrawal. Our relationship, based on my selfish tilling and harvesting, died. But with time and dormancy, it was transformed into something that still leaves me in wonder. In times of fallowness, when nothing appears to grow in once-thriving fields, we await God's renewal of the very Ground that sustains us.

The people of Israel knew this cycle well. Though scholars debate practical observances of jubilee, it is significant that this mandate found its way into Scripture. The Exodus 23 directive is God's reminder that with Chosen-ness comes grave responsibility. Israelites were reminded every seven years that they came from nothing – they were once “strangers in a strange land.” The required seventh-year dormancy produced fruits for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan – and fruits of institutional memory for Israel. God thus profoundly bound the people to the land and to one another. Even today, one cannot be neglected without disastrous consequences for the other.

It is hard to mull God's transforming power in fallowness without considering the state of our world. We have warred in the Middle East for decades now. Among the innumerable casualties stands the land's devastation. When bombs drop and bullets fly, the war cry to spread the “fruit” of democracy betrays itself in the scorched earth. Scorched earth and fallow land cannot coexist. Fallowness is a holy process of renewal; scorching the earth with war only reflects our efforts to control the Ground and our idolatry for human-produced harvests.

We receive the Neighbors in Need offering and support the justice ministries for which it serves as seed because of our desire that God may fallow and renew our world. May we all learn to wait with longing for the caress of the Holy One who makes scorched, dead lands abound with life.

PRAYER:

We remember, O God, your commands to the people of Israel during the Exodus: to sow fields and harvest crops for six years. And in the seventh year, to let them lay fallow so that the poor may have the food they produce. We are called to share our abundance. Let us live out God's challenge to the sojourners in the desert, to cultivate a land of abundance, and share it with all who are in need.

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The Acceptable Year of the Lord

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.

Leviticus 25:10

Alfred and Teresia are Marshallese students whose parents emigrated from Enewetak Atoll to Hawai'i. They are in the 10th grade at Ka'u High School on Hawai'i island. They wrote these words for a school presentation:

Sixty-seven!! Sixty-seven atomic and hydrogen bombs exploded in the Marshall Islands between the years of 1946 and 1958. Forty-four of them exploded in Enewetak Atoll, the atoll of my family. Twenty-three of them exploded on and near Bikini Atoll.

What have these 67 American acts done to our people?

What have these 67 American acts done to our water?

What have these 67 American acts done to our islands?

. . . We want answers to these problems. What is happening to our people? What is happening to our water and our land? What is happening to our future? Why are we here? This is the question that many people want to know. People ask us, 'Why don't you go back where you came from?'

The Marshallese inhabitants of Bikini and Enewetak Atolls were relocated to make way for U.S. nuclear detonations in the Marshall Islands. In February 1946, Commodore Ben H. Wyatt, the military governor of the Marshalls, traveled to Bikini. On a Sunday after church, he assembled the Bikinians to ask if they would be willing to leave their atoll temporarily so that the United States could begin testing atomic bombs for “the good of mankind and to end all world wars.” King Juda, then the leader of the Bikinian people, stood up after much confused and sorrowful deliberation among his people, and announced, “We will go believing that everything is in the hands of God.”¹⁵

The Bikinians have been exiled from their homeland since 1946, except for a brief period after President Lyndon Johnson announced in 1968 that Bikini was safe and the people could return. Many of the islanders returned and lived there until 1978, when medical tests by U.S. doctors revealed that the people had ingested what may have been the largest amounts of radioactive material of any known population. The people were then moved off the atoll immediately.



On December 12, 1947, the people of Enewetak were exiled from the southern islands of their atoll for 33 years, and approximately half the population still cannot return to their home islands in the northern part of Enewetak Atoll because the land remains too radioactive 56 years later.¹⁶

The Jubilee mandate of returning to one's own property in the Hebrew Bible was a way to redistribute the land to all the families of Israel. The Jubilee mandates were designed to resist and reverse the human tendency to accumulate wealth and create

poverty. It is easy to see how inequality occurred in an agrarian society when peasant farmers lost their crops due to natural or human causes, went into debt in order to eat and replant, lost their land if their crops still fell short or if interest on their debt was too exorbitant, and finally fell into slavery. It was important for liberated Israel to create a new process in which debts would be forgiven, slaves released, and the land redistributed periodically.

Jesus' ministry begins with his appearance at the Nazareth synagogue in Luke 4:16-21 and his quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2a with the words, "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." These words are understood to be a direct reference to the Year of Jubilee.

People of the Bikini and Enewetak Atolls in the Marshall Islands have been forced to leave their homeland since the mid-1940s. Not only have they been living a life of wandering refugees, but their land remains highly radioactive from the 67 atomic and nuclear tests that were conducted on their islands. If they are ever to return to their homelands, the cleanup options involve scraping all the radioactive soil off the atoll and replacing it with non-radioactive soil. The U.S. Congress has yet to pass the Changed Circumstances Petition that provides the funds to do the cleanup.

The Marshallese people of Bikini and Enewetak are not the only "neighbors in need." Millions of refugees are found throughout the world, usually facing discrimination from those around them. As people of faith, we need to reflect seriously upon the Jubilee mandates in the Hebrew Bible in which all would have enough and none would have more than enough. Isn't this what Jesus' mission was all about?

Prayer:

We remember God's words to Moses as he was atop the mountain, calling God's people to celebrate Jubilee justice by making a way home for people who have been separated from their families and their lands by debt, by bondage, by poverty, by conflict.

Ronald Fujiyoshi *is active in the Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries (PAAM) of the UCC and serves on the Justice and Witness Ministries Board of Directors. He served as a UCC missionary in Asia for 20 years, and recently has worked with ERUB, the organization of the Marshallese survivors of the 67 atomic and nuclear tests.*

Conclusion

William Sloane Coffin, Jr. served as a mentor to many of us, whether he knew it or not. For those of us who had the extraordinary privilege of knowing him personally, we gleaned both inspiration and insight that moved us to a greater moral clarity on a plethora of issues. Bill had a way with words that served him well in writing as well as in the pulpit.

In the wake of the devastating attack by terrorists on September 11, 2001, and after the response of the present powers became evident, Bill wrote a powerful reflection entitled “Despair is not an option.” In it, he lamented the direction taken by U.S. leaders in responding to the tragedy: “It was a ripe moment – to educate the soul of the nation, to improve the quality of our suffering. We had lost our sense of invulnerability and superpower invincibility, but as these were only illusions, we should not have grieved their passing. Other nations too had been unfairly hurt, many of them, and far worse than we. But instead of deepening our kinship with the world suffering, the President chose to invoke an almost unlimited sense of entitlement to pursue in our own way what he termed a struggle ‘to rid the world of evil.’” That was in 2004. Sadly, his words ring true more than three years later.

We in Justice and Witness Ministries strongly believe that today is another ripe moment to educate the soul of the nation and, indeed, of our global community. We in the United Church of Christ have a once-every-fifty-year opportunity to commit to a radically-other way of approaching economics, human relationships, and, quite literally, the survival of our planet. To seize the moment will require radical faith and moral courage. We will need radical faith to believe that a jubilee way of life is not a flight of fancy, a fairy tale to be relegated to a trash heap of out-of-touch Christian fantasy. We will need moral courage to live out that faith in our lives, both individually and in community, and to demand that its principles become incarnate in public policy.

We are given a rare opportunity this year as UCC Christians. What if we took jubilee seriously enough to declare June 2007 to May 2008 to be a sabbatical year? What if we took that time to study and struggle with the issues of oppression, debt, land use, and slavery? What if we reached out to one another with the insights the Still-Speaking God provides? What if we dreamed together outrageous dreams of what if? What if . . .? Then maybe, just maybe, it may prove to be the acceptable year of the Lord.¹⁷

¹Genesis 2:1. Ched Myers observes that the cycle is one of good work and rest. Ched Myers, *Sabbath Economics* (Washington, D.C.: Church of the Savior, 2001), p. 10.

²Exodus 20:8-11.

³Exodus 21:1-11; Deuteronomy 15:1-18.

⁴Leviticus 25:1-55.

⁵Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 1171-1172.

⁶Ibid.

⁷City councils in many communities, including Portland, Oregon, are working to close pay day loan stores or place limits on the interest rates they may charge.

⁸The book of Deuteronomy, with its suggestions for social reform, is said to have been formulated in the 7th century BCE. The authors of Deuteronomy were aware of previous Neo-Assyrian state treaties such as the Vassal Treaty of Esarhaddon (672 BCE). They pattern their covenant after that treaty tradition, but turn the weapon of imperialism into a bid for freedom. They shift an oath of loyalty from the Assyrian overlord to God.

⁹*The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV* (Oxford, 2001), p. 240.

¹⁰2 Kings 22:8.

¹¹John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004), p. 165.

¹²See the edict of Ammisaduqa from Babylon, 17th century BCE; J. B. Prichard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relation to the Old Testament*, pp. 526-528.

¹³Leviticus 25:10; Isaiah 61:1; and Jeremiah 34:15, 17.

¹⁴Isaiah 58 and 60.

¹⁵Jack Niedenthal, *For the Good of Mankind: A History of the People of Bikini and their Islands* (Majuro, Marshall Islands: Micronitor Publishing, 2001), p. 2.

¹⁶Statement of the Peoples of Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap and Utrik before the Natural Resources Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, July 10, 2003.

¹⁷William Sloane Coffin, "Despair is not an option", *The Nation*, No. 2, Vol. 278, January 12, 2004, p. 5.

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